

From Voting to Running for Political Office: The Role of Women in Midwestern Politics

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From the woman suffrage movement of the 19th Century to their leadership as elected officials in the 21st Century, women have played an important role in the political life of the Midwest. Several Midwestern states were among the first to approve laws granting women the right to vote, and 5 of the 12 states in the region have above average records in electing women legislators.

Kansas was the first state in the Midwest—and among the first in the nation—to grant women full suffrage rights. When Kansas entered the Union in 1861, women could vote in local school elections. In 1886, Kansas extended the women's vote to municipal elections. The nation's first woman mayor, Susanna Madora Salter, was elected the following year in Argonia, and an all-woman city council with a woman mayor took office in Oskaloosa in 1888. The women of Kansas were granted tax and bond suffrage in 1903 and won full suffrage through a constitutional amendment in 1912. At that time, only eight other states—all in the West—granted full suffrage to women.

Two other Midwestern states granted women full suffrage before the ratification of the 19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution giving women the right to vote in 1920. The women of Michigan won school suffrage in 1875, the right to vote on tax and bond issues in 1908, presidential suffrage in 1917, and full suffrage through a state constitutional amendment in 1918. The women of South Dakota gained school suffrage in 1887 and full suffrage via a state constitutional amendment in 1918.

All other Midwestern states approved limited suffrage before ratification of the 19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. The women of Wisconsin could run for school boards and other elective school offices in 1869, vote on issues related to schools in 1900, and vote in presidential elections in 1919. The women of Minnesota first voted in school elections in 1875 and presidential elections in 1919. The women of Nebraska voted in school elections in 1883 and presidential elections in 1917. The women of North Dakota gained school suffrage in 1889 and, in 1893, Superintendent of Education Laura Eisenhuth (D) became the first woman in the nation to hold statewide elective office. The women of Ohio voted in school elections in 1891 and presidential elections in 1919. In 1913, Illinois women won the right to vote in municipal and presidential elections. Women in North Dakota and Indiana had presidential suffrage in 1917. Women in Iowa were granted presidential suffrage in 1919.

Once the 19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution was proposed to the state legislatures by the Sixty-Sixth Congress on June 4, 1919, most Midwestern states were among the first to ratify—Illinois, Michigan, and Wisconsin on June 10; Kansas and Ohio on June 16; Iowa on July 2; Missouri on July 3; Nebraska on August 2; Minnesota on September 8; North Dakota on

December 1; and South Dakota on December 4, 1919. Indiana ratified on January 16, 1920. Ratification was completed, with the vote of the Tennessee legislature, on August 18, 1920.

During the 72-year campaign for woman suffrage, several Midwestern women led the way. Carrie Chapman Catt, who was born in Ripon, Wis., in 1859, and raised on a farm near Charles City, Iowa, dedicated most of her life to the cause. After attending her first state suffrage convention in 1885 and national convention in 1890, she rose quickly through the ranks of the movement, becoming Susan B. Anthony's chosen successor as president of the National American Woman Suffrage Association in 1900. Catt again became president of the NAWSA in 1915 and led the woman suffrage cause to victory in 1919.

Other Midwestern women with prominent roles in the woman suffrage movement include former slave Sojourner Truth, who became a speaker on women's rights in 1850 and lived in Battle Creek, Mich., from 1867 to her death in 1883; Amelia Bloomer, who moved from Seneca Falls, N.Y., where she was editor of the nation's first women's rights newspaper, *The Lily*, to Council Bluffs, Iowa, in 1855, and campaigned for woman suffrage in Iowa and Nebraska; Dr. Mary Thomas of Indiana, who edited *The Lily* when it moved to Richmond in 1855; Virginia Minor of Missouri, whose case suing the state for denying her the vote in 1872 was heard by the U.S. Supreme Court; Frances Willard of Illinois, who as president of the Women's Christian Temperance Union from 1879 to 1897, helped link suffrage to temperance and contributed vast resources to the cause; and Ida Wells-Barnett, who formed the first black female suffrage club in Illinois and marched in the NAWSA parade with her white colleagues in 1913, thus helping integrate the movement.

Since the suffrage movement, most Midwestern states have continued to make progress in women's political participation. In 2002, 5 of the 12 Midwestern states have above average records in electing women to their legislatures. Midwestern women also have achieved several political firsts.

Kansas leads the Midwest, ranking 6th in the nation with 33% of its legislature comprised of women. Kansas also boasts several firsts in terms of electing women to federal and state office. In 1978, Nancy Landon Kassebaum (R) became the first woman elected to serve in the U.S. Senate without having previously filled an unexpired congressional term. She was the only woman in the Senate at the time of her election. Kassebaum was reelected twice and, in 1995, became the first woman to head a major Senate committee when she became chair of Labor and Human Resources. In 1991, Joan Finney (D) became the first woman to serve as governor by defeating the incumbent. Kansas is the only Midwestern state that has elected a woman governor (although women are running for governor in Kansas, Michigan, and Wisconsin in 2002). In 2002, Kansas has a woman attorney general and Commissioner of Insurance—Kathleen Sibelius (D)—who has filed to run for governor.

Minnesota also has provided a good environment for women in politics among the Midwestern states. About 30% of the Minnesota legislature is made up of women, ranking the state 10th in the nation. Minnesota women also have served in the U.S. Senate; U.S. House of Representatives; and in a variety of statewide elected executive offices, such as lieutenant governor, secretary of state, state treasurer, and state auditor.

Illinois has a strong record of electing women to political office, dating back to 1922 when Winnifred S.M. Huck (R) won a special election to the U.S. House of Representatives to fill a vacancy caused by the death of her father. In 1928, Ruth Hanna McCormick (R) was elected to the U.S. House. In every subsequent decade, Illinois has elected a woman to the U.S. Congress: 11 women have represented the state in the U.S. House and, in 1993, Carol Moseley-Braun became the first (and only) African American woman to serve in the U.S. Senate. Illinois ranks 16th in the nation with a state legislature that is 27% women. Illinois voters also have elected a woman as mayor of its largest city. Jane Byrne (D) served as mayor of Chicago from 1979 to 1983.

Wisconsin ranks 22nd in the nation with a state legislature comprised of 23.5% women. Although the state has elected only one woman to Congress, U.S. Rep. Tammy Baldwin became the first openly gay woman to be elected to Congress in 1998. In 1978, Secretary of State Vel R. Phillips (D) became the first African American woman in the country elected statewide to an executive post. Kathleen Falk (D) is running for governor in 2002.

Missouri ranks just above average—at 24th—with a state legislature that is 23% women. Women there were barred from running for office until an amendment to the state constitution passed on August 2, 1921. In 1922, Mellicene Smith (D) and Sarah Lucille Turner (D) were the first women elected to the Missouri legislature. Five women have represented Missouri in the U.S. House, beginning with Leonor Kretzer Sullivan (D) in 1953. U.S. Senator Jean Carnahan (D) was appointed to a seat won posthumously by her husband in 2000 and is running for election in 2002. Former Lt. Gov. Harriett Woods (D) remains a leader on the national political scene, having served as president of the National Women's Political Caucus in 1991-95 and head of the Coalition for Women's Appointments.

Michigan ranks just below average—at 26th—with 22.3% of its state legislature comprised of women. However, in 2002, three women represent the state in Congress; two women serve in statewide political office; and Attorney General Jennifer Granholm (D) has filed to run for governor. Michigan also boasts one of the nation's leaders in the campaign for women's equality. U. S. Rep. Martha Wright Griffiths (D), who served in Congress from 1955 to 1974, was most responsible for including women in the Civil Rights Act of 1964. In 1970, she successfully filed a discharge petition to get the Equal Rights Amendment—which had been buried in congressional committees for 47 years—out of the House Judiciary Committee.

Iowa ranks 27th with 22% of its legislature comprised of women. Women were not allowed to serve in the state legislature until 1926, when Iowa's constitution was amended. In 1928, Carolyn Campbell Pendray (D) was the first woman elected to the Iowa House of Representatives and, in 1933, to the state Senate. In 1999, Iowa became one of two states with a woman elected to serve as secretary of agriculture. However, Iowa is one of only six states that has never sent a woman to either the U.S. House or Senate. Two women are running against incumbents for seats in the U.S. House in 2002. Ohio ranks 28th with 22% of its legislature comprised of women. Three women represent the state in the U.S. House of Representatives and two serve in statewide executive office as lieutenant governor and attorney general in 2002.

The other states in the Midwest have less progressive records in electing women to office, but with some highlights. For example, in 1986, Nebraska's Kay Orr became the first Republican woman to be elected governor in any state and the first woman to run against another woman for a gubernatorial post. With 20.4% of its Unicameral legislature comprised of women, Nebraska ranks 31st in the nation. Indiana ranks 36th in the nation with a legislature that is 17.3% women. One Indiana woman currently serves in the U.S. House of Representatives and three hold statewide executive office.

North Dakota ranks 37th with a legislature that is 17% women. Only one woman has represented the state in the U.S. Congress. Jocelyn Birch Burdick (D) was appointed in 1992 to fill the vacancy caused by the death of her husband. Two women serve in statewide executive office in 2002, and former Attorney General Heidi Heitkamp made a run for governor in 2000.

South Dakota ranks 42nd in the nation with a state legislature that is 15.2% women. Two women have represented the state in the U.S. Senate, both after the death of men. South Dakota does have a long history of electing women to statewide executive office, particularly secretary of state. Fifteen women have served in this capacity from 1927 to 2002.

Drawing on statistics of women in state legislatures, researchers have speculated why some regions of the country do better than others in electing women to political office. A 1998 study comparing the number of women in state legislatures from 1964 through 1995 found that women were most numerous in legislatures in the Northeast and West, and least numerous in the South and Mid-Atlantic regions. However, the growth in women's representation in state legislatures has been more rapid in recent years in the West and Midwest—most notably in Kansas and Minnesota. Overall, states with a large pool of potential women candidates, interest group strength, moralistic political cultures, multimember districts, and high levels of turnover have more women in their state legislatures.

Sources

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